The University of Texas at Austin
Texas Education Review
College of Education

Journal Homepage: Texas Education Review
Published online: February 2019
Submit your article to this journal

Experiential Learning and Its Impact on College Students

REBECCA GAVILLET
The University of Texas at Austin

To cite this article: Gavillet, R. (2018). Experiential learning and its impact on college students**.** *Texas Education Review*, *7*(1), 140-149. http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/21

Experiential Learning and Its Impact on College Students

REBECCA GAVILLET
The University of Texas at Austin

Education research extensively focuses on childhood, adolescent, and young adult development. While we know adults continue developing cognitively, socially, and emotionally past young adulthood, there is a lack of research in this area (Murphy, Sahakyan, Yong-Yi, & Magnan, 2014). With the growing importance of a college degree throughout the United States, research on adult development is required in order to advise faculty and administrators to design programming and curriculum that advance student development. Experiential-based learning is a growing and ample area for studying adult development. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), more than half of surveyed college seniors reported engaging in experience-based activities in their college career (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2010). Experiential education is a method of action-based training traditionally used in the workplace (Kolb, 2014; Murphy, Sahakyan, Yong-Yi, & Magnan, 2014), and educators have adopted the method to teach adult students (Fenwick, 2000). Education researchers have identified the concept of experiential education, or experiential learning, as a system to improve civic and global engagement, increasingly important gaps in traditional education practices (Association of Experiential Education, 2012; Kolb, 2014). Educators facilitate learning by purposively including the method into course or programmatic design, encouraging after action reflection, and creating a collaborative learning environment. This paper reviews existing literature and theoretical frameworks regarding experiential learning (EL), provides a synopsis of common EL activities, and concludes with a discussion on how educators can expand EL in higher education settings.

Literature Review

EL is a teaching philosophy which seeks to "engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities" (Association of Experiential Education, 2012). EL is used in all levels of education and training, with the purpose of engaging learners through experience, such as internships, study abroad, and community projects. Research has shown students learn best when actively involved with their education (Caulfield & Woods, 2013; Fenwick, 2000; Kolb, 2014). This is the goal of EL. Another goal of EL is that students gain a global perspective and learn how their actions directly affect their community and the world at large.

In the increasingly more connected global community, higher education leaders have supported experiential education in varying degrees as a means to improve civic and global engagement (Association of Experiential Education, 2012; Fenwick, 2000). Research has shown adults aged over 21 years learn differently than their younger counterparts, preferring to learn through experience (Kolb, 2014). Learning through action and self-reflection primes individuals to cultivate new opinions and viewpoints, altering social and emotional intelligence (Kolb, 2014; Tarrant, 2010). In particular, adult learners have been found to learn best through experiences, making EL beneficial in higher education settings (Kolb, 2014).

Research has revealed that partaking in EL affects college students' long-term socially responsible behavior. Caulfield and Woods (2013) found that EL, with a clearly defined focus on social issues, led to long term socially responsible behavior, even if the actions taken did not exactly match the proposed actions at the end of the class (Caulfield & Woods, 2013). Socially responsible

behavior is defined as, "behavior that enhances social well-being within communities" (Caulfield & Woods, 2013, p. 33). This finding provides an added public benefit to EL by describing how these students make a difference in a larger context, which can improve students' abilities to influence their community.

Theoretical Frameworks

In recent years, higher education has incorporated EL as a way to develop students' abilities to problem solve from a real world perspective (Tarrant, 2010). One example of this includes Tarrant's (2010) work, which outlined a framework for global citizenship, including concepts of justice, the environment, and civic obligations (values, beliefs, and norms). Tarrant based the framework on Values Belief Norm (VBN) theory of Proenvironmental Behavior, a theory that considers justice from a social-psychological approach. The theory is modified to incorporate experiential education programs in order to improve global competency development of students participating in study abroad. Tarrant (2010) argued that using social models like VBN in study abroad curriculum creates more robust learning experiences, as opposed to the activities being token or service tourism.

Extant research has used several frameworks to examine subjects' social/cultural competence development in relation to EL (Cranton, 2002; Dewey, 1997; Fenwick, 2000; Kolb, 1975; Kramer, 2000). Dewey (1997) was the first to call for practical guidelines for progressive education, a term he deemed in contrast to traditional education. In his book *Experience in Education*, first published in 1938, Dewey (1997) challenged the education system to focus on the human experience of learning. For Dewey, educators must train students in a specific discipline, while also providing unique experiences that provide continuity and interaction. Dewey's theory of experiences highlighted the importance of the relationship between *continuity*, a student's ability to shape their future, and *interaction*, how individuals past experiences shape their viewpoint. Because students are all unique, this interaction differs for each person.

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning

Working from Dewey's (1997) assumptions, Kolb (2014) linked the benefits of EL to educational settings. Kolb's (2014) theory of EL focused on internal cognitive processes in a continuous four stage cycle of learning where the reflective component is a key component to learning. The cyclical model, as seen in Figure 1, consisted of four stages: concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and abstract experimentation (Kramer, 2000). According to Kolb (2014), when an individual engages in EL, they encounter a new experience or situation and are challenged to reflect on contradictions between assumptions and actions. Reflection leads to new thoughts and ideas about the situation, which are applied and tested in the world. The cycle continues with the participant reentering the concrete experience with an expanded viewpoint. Operative learning is determined by a student's progression through the cycle.

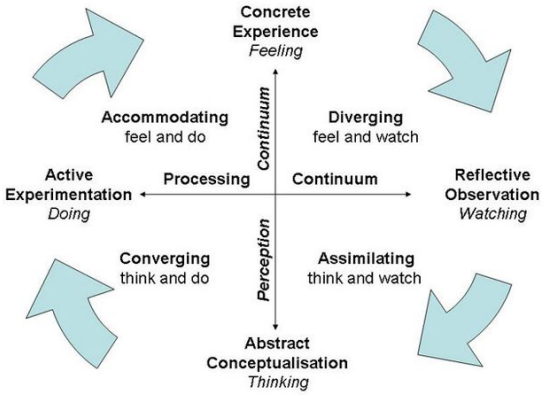

Figure 1. Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory asserts that individuals develop perspectives through a process of perspective transformation (Cranton, 2002; Mezirow, 2000). According to Mezirow (2000), learning should force individuals "to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others" (p. 8). Transformation theory has three key tenets: psychological, convictional, and behavioral (Mezirow, 2000). The theory is applied to adult education as a means to study adult learner's ability to transform perspectives (Cranton, 2002; Dirkx, 1998). Adult students often enter higher education programs with a more solidified sense of self and understanding of the world than their younger counterparts. Educators have used the three dimensions of change to view how adult learners can cultivate a new perspective on the world, others, and themselves through educational opportunities (Sokol & Cranton, 1998). EL provides transformative learning in a way traditional classroom experience cannot by offering adult students tangible, hands-on experiences in the field.

Cultural Competence Theory

Fenwick (2000) offered a comparative analysis of five critical cultural theory perspectives: constructivist, psychoanalytical, situative, critical cultural, and enactivist ecological (p. 267). Those with a constructivist or reflective perspective use previous experiences and personal intentions to develop knowledge. When one's culture conflicts with a new culture, learning occurs during this conflict. Individuals with a situative, or participation, perspective believe learning must occur during social, community-based interactions. In the critical cultural or resistance perspective, the focus is on political and power dynamics between authority figures and those they oppress. For those with an enactivist or co-emergence perspective, learning occurs when students interact within the environment. The learner's objective is dependent upon each experience. According to Fenwick (2000), each perspective provided a distinct relationship between EL, student, and educator, creating a different learning experience dependent on perspective.

Cultural competence is the ability to understand and appreciate differences amongst cultures and respecting otherness (Stebleton, Soria, & Cherney, 2013). Measures of competence include applying discipline-specific knowledge to global concerns, collaborating with others from different cultures, and comfortability being in another culture. The cultural competence model demonstrates

how individuals progress from inward thinking to a capacity for intercultural collaboration (see Figure 2 below). Self-awareness of acknowledging implicit bias and preconceived notions about others is the initial stage. As individuals actively move out of homogeneous spaces and engage with other cultures, they develop through the stages of risk taking, and global awareness. Collaboration across cultures is the goal. Competence is valuable in all heterogeneous interactions in providing context and knowledge about how others process information.

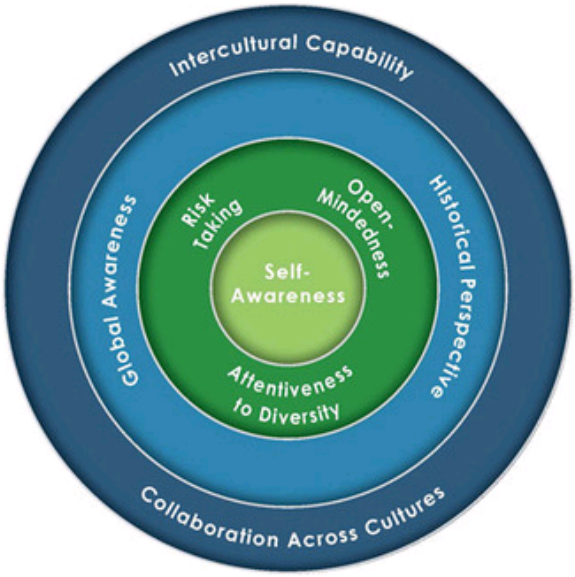

Figure 2. Cultural competence model.

Theory guides researchers and practitioners when developing curricula and academic programs. Examining adult student development is an important area of research, as it provides insight into cognitive, psychosocial, and behavioral development among this population (Cranton, 2002; Fenwick, 2000; Kramer, 2000). Additionally, practitioners use theory to cultivate effective learning experiences. Student identity development theories bond the effect of experiential education practices with the learner's identity development in the areas of social and cultural competence (Cranton, 2002; Fenwick, 2000; Kramer, 2000).

Types of Experiential Learning Opportunities

There are various types of EL opportunities available to college students, both inside and outside of the classroom (Association of Experiential Education, 2012). Curricular opportunities offer students the chance to earn credit for EL activities. They also typically offer the benefit of dedicated class time to discuss and reflect on experiences. Co-curricular activities deliver non-credit based activities that mirror curricular content. The experiences may be tied to specific learning outcomes outlined in program curriculum or may be altogether non-academic, such as service learning.

Below are descriptions of different types of EL activities, including curricular, co-curricular, and non-curricular. This is not a comprehensive listing of EL activities in higher education but, instead, an examination of common activities offered to students. The activities provide a more robust understanding of the types of experiences students may participate within during their college years.

Simulation Based Learning

Simulation based learning is a method of EL that enables students to analyze real world problems in a simulated environment (Powers & Kirkpatrick, 2012; Skagen, McCollum, Morsch, & Shokoples, 2018). They are traditionally completed in a classroom environment as part of a course. Simulations offer teams a learning environment that allows for creativity and chance taking that may be intolerable or frowned upon in real life scenarios (Skagen et al., 2018). The goal of simulations is to improve specified skills or abilities in a controlled setting. Team members are encouraged to consider various opinions, frameworks, and viewpoints to solve a given problem.

Working in teams is a valuable element of simulation learning (Denholm, Protopsaltis, & de Freitas, 2013). Hong and Page (2004) found diverse teams outperform more highly skilled teams when confronting the same problem. Diverse backgrounds and experience lead to more options in problem solving and help avoid group think behaviors (Hong & Page, 2004). Teams constructed of individuals different than one another (measured in variables including gender, ethnicity, and domestic or international student status) provide more creative and well-developed solutions than homogenous groups (Tarrant, 2010).

Dependent on the simulation's objective, the activity may seek to improve participant's skills, knowledge, and abilities in a variety of areas (Denholm, Protopsaltis, & de Freitas, 2013; Powers & Kirkpatrick, 2012; Skagen, et al., 2018). Social skills are often tested and stretched in team-based simulations, which is significant, as communication skills are required for effective teamwork (Powers & Kirkpatrick, 2012). Conflict resolution is inherent when teams are confronted with a complex problem, especially when the group is constructed of diverse individuals (Hong & Page, 2004). Powers and Kirkpatrick (2012) found effective conflict resolution strategies are critical in group decision making for both the team leader and team members to feel valued. These skills are required to succeed in academic and work environments. Developing and/or practicing these skills benefit participants in other settings outside the simulation. Many students seek continuing education to develop these skills (Fenwick, 2000).

Internships

Internships offer students work experience in a chosen industry or functional area (Boose, 2011). Internships may be paid or unpaid; curricular, co-curricular, or non-curricular; or required or optional, all dependent on the institution and/or department. Three components constitute an internship: a sponsoring company or organization, the student, and the higher education institution. Boose (2011) found the most fruitful internships for all parties occur when true partnerships emerge. Internships provide individual gains for multiple parties. Students gain valuable skills as well as grow their professional network. Employers have an opportunity to meet and interact with potential hires as well as gain free or low cost labor (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). Universities and colleges perhaps enjoy the most benefits. In a successful relationship, higher education institutions gain a learning lab for students, a pipeline for job placement, and strong community partners (Boose, 2011). All stakeholders must be fully engaged in the experience order for the experience to be successful. Relationship development and early integration are key components of a robust internship program.

Internships have a strong impact on student experiences in the workforce and community when designed and supported appropriately (Boose, 2011; Gault, et al., 2000). Gault et al. (2000) found undergraduate business students who had an internship saw significant advantages early in their careers in comparison to peers who did not have an internship in college. A larger sample of

senior college students responding to the NSSE found similar results. From the students surveyed, 73 percent perceived work experience while in college to be important in helping them to gain knowledge and skills required for their chosen field (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2010). Additionally, of the same group of students, 48 percent reported that educational experiences taught them how to make an impact on their communities. Employers also consider internships important, reporting to both the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) that internships are viewed favorably when evaluating candidates (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2010).

Study Abroad

Established study abroad practices may be one of the most widely known EL programs. At any given time, there are thousands of American students learning in another country (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Faculty-led programs provide students a known entity to learn from in a safe space, while shielding participants from fully integrating into the new culture. Short- and long-term exchange allows students an opportunity to adapt to the culture. Service non-academic programs are related to exchange with university volunteers learning outside the classroom. Closely linked are exchange programs for international students to study in the U.S. Again, these activities may last for one semester or extend through a whole degree.

The multidimensional aspect of international education leads to many models of study abroad (Helms, 2015; Kehm & Teichler, 2007). Administrators strategically develop diverse international education activities to respond to global challenges faced by postsecondary institutions and graduates (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Dewey & Duff, 2009), and program design is determined by institution type, disciplines, scalability, and capacity (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). Certain programs lend themselves to westernization practices. Outpost institutions, or branch campuses, are physical campuses of established universities in international locations, offering degree programs to foreign students (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Curricula generally aligns with programs at the home institution without taking into consideration cultural or environmental differences.

Study abroad opportunities in American college are hailed as a bridge to increased social and cultural development (Stebleton, Soria, & Cherney, 2013). Students travel abroad and experience new cultures, landing outside their comfort zone and pushing themselves to embrace differences. Ideally, students return to their home country with a changed, altruistic perspective of the world (Murphy, Sahakyan, Yong-Yi, & Magnan, 2014). While this may be the case for some students, many components must occur in the curriculum for study abroad to have an impact on students' long-term social and cultural competence (Fenwick, 2000).

Implications and Discussion

The overall rationale of experiential education relate to larger issues in higher education, such as how adult students learn and how to help students develop into socially responsible, global citizens. In an increasingly more global community, today's students must be prepared to understand not only their own needs but also those within their direct and indirect communities. As found in Caulfield and Woods (2013), utilizing EL with a focus on social issues can have a direct impact on a student's socially responsible behavior, increasing the likelihood the student will become a proactive member of their community. Applying Dewey, Fenwick, and Kolb's theoretical frameworks enable faculty to clearly define and structure EL for student's benefit. Educators can use this knowledge

when developing programs and curriculum to encourage long-term behavioral change in adult students.

Contributing Pieces

This critical forum will further explore experiential learning and adult learners in higher education. The first piece in this issue is an editorial by The University of Texas at Austin President Greg Fenves. Fenves details the ways experiential learning shaped his early college career. A summer internship at Weidlinger Associates, an engineering firm, during his undergraduate career in engineering gave Fenves the opportunity to apply theory in practice and expanded his understanding of engineering concepts. Faculty mentorship provided structure as well as a subject matter expert to test ideas. Weidlinger challenged Fenves and the assignments he worked on provided concrete evidence of how engineers practice their trade. Fenves was empowered by the work, realizing his ability to make an impact through action. The internship experience left a lasting impression, ultimately shaping one of the strategic initiatives of his presidency. Fenves' piece provides a personal account of the long-term impact of experiential education, as well as the steps Fenves is taking to increase EL at UT Austin.

The second article in the issue is by Laufer, McKeen, and Jester, a team of researchers specializing in assurance of learning in graduate education. Assurance of learning is a system of evaluating learning outcomes through assessment. The authors describe the proliferation of experiential education in graduate business programming in response to student needs. Speaking from an administrative point of view, the authors provide a set of assurance of learning standards for graduate business programs to utilize in program development. This piece provides a guide for practitioners to use when designing or evaluating experiential education programming.

Rebecca Gavillet, M.A., is currently a Ph.D. student in Higher Education Leadership at The University of Texas at Austin. Rebecca's research interests include international education curriculum design, experiential education, and graduate student success. Rebecca is Senior Program Coordinator for the MBA+ Leadership Program, where she aims to develop students as leaders, managing micro-consulting projects, leadership and executive coaching program, industry seminars and events. Previously, Rebecca oversaw student services for working professional graduate students at the Cockrell School of Engineering at UT Austin. Before coming to Texas, Rebecca worked at the College of DuPage in community relations and marketing, connecting the institution with key stakeholders. She also has past experience in college admissions, business development, and non-profit program management. Rebecca was born and raised in Aurora, Illinois. She received her M.A. in Higher Education from Argosy University and a B.A. in Psychology from Augustana College.

References

Altbach, P. G., & Knight, J. (2007). The internationalization of higher education: Motivation and realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 11(*3-4), 290-305.

Association of American Colleges & Universities. (2010). New research on internships and experien tial learning programs. *Peer Review, 12*(4), 29–30. Retrieved from http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=tru e&db=a2h&AN=57276401&site=ehost-live

Association of Experiential Education. (2012). What is experiential education? Retrieved from http://www.aee.org/what-is-ee

Boose, M. A. (2011). Managing internships: Experiential learning that can benefit business students, industry, and academic units. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, *1*(1). doi:10.19030/tlc.v1i1.1898.

Caulfield, J., & Woods, T. (2013). Experiential learning: Exploring its long-term impact on socially responsible behavior. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.13*(2), 31-48.

Cranton, P. (2002). Teaching for transformation. In J. M. Ross-Gordon (Ed.), *New directions for adult and continuing education: Contemporary viewpoints on teaching adults effectively* (pp. 63-71). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspectives in the research process*. London: Sage.

Dewey, J. (1997). *Experience and education.* New York, NY: Touchstone.

Dewey, P., & Duff, S. (2009). Reason before passion: Faculty views on internationalization in higher education. *Higher Education, 58(*4), 491-504.

Denholm, J. A., Protopsaltis, A., & de Freitas, S. (2013). The value of team-based mixed-reality (TBMR) games in higher education. *International Journal of Game-Based Learning, 3*(1), 18-33. doi:10.4018/ijgbl.2013010102.

Dirkx, J. M. (1998). Transformative learning theory in the practice of adult education: An overview. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning, 7,* 1-14.

Fenwick, T. J. (2000). Expanding conceptions of experiential learning: A review of the five contem porary perspectives on cognition. *Adult Quarterly, 50*(4), 243-272.

Gault, J., Redington, J., & Schlager, T. (2000). Undergraduate business internships and career suc cess: Are they related? *Journal of Marketing Education*, *22*(1), 45-53. doi.org/10.1177/0273475300221006.

Hong., L., & Page, S. E. (2004). Groups of diverse problem solvers can outperform groups of high-ability problem solvers. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 101*(46), 16385-16389.

Kehm, B. M., & Teichler, U. (2004). Research on internationalisation in higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 11(*3-4), 260-273.

Kolb, D. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Kramer, C. (2000). Stages of moral development by Lawrence Kohlberg. Retrieved from http://www.xenodochy.org/ex/lists/moraldev.html

Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*, (pp. 3-34). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Murphy, D., Sahakyan, N., Yong-Yi, D., & Magnan, S. (2014). The impact of study abroad on

the global engagement of university graduates. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 4,* 1-24.

Powers, R. B. & Kirkpatrick, K. (2012). Playing with conflict: Teaching conflict resolution through simulations and games. *Simulation & Games, 44*(1), 51-72.

Skagen, D., McCollum, Morsch, L., & Shokoples, B. (2018). Developing communication confidence and professional identity in chemistry through international online collaborative learning. *Chemistry Education Research and Practice, 19*, 567-582. doi:10.1039/C7RP00220C.

Stebleton, M., Soria, K., & Cherney, B. (2013). The high impact of education abroad: College students' engagement in international experiences and the development of intercultural competencies. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, *22,* 1-24.

Tarrant, M. A. (2010). A conceptual framework for exploring the role of studies abroad in nurturing global citizenship. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 14*, 433-451.